

Flooding and COVID and Sanctions! Oh My! Are These Problems Behind Changes in the DPRK News Format?

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By Robert R. King

From July 25 to August 26 Kim Jong-un convened three high-level meetings of the Worker's Party Politburo—an unusual display of urgency by the North Korean leader. Only four such meetings were held in the previous six months of this year.

The problems Kim and North Korea are facing seem to be particularly daunting. Flooding from monsoon rains and two typhoons have drenched North Korea in the last five weeks. The Monsoon rains of early August caused landslides and floods which damaged 100,000 acres of farmland (151 sq. miles), some 16,000 households were affected, and the reported death toll was 22. As that disaster ended Typhoon Bavi (No. 8 in North Korea's typhoon numbering system), struck western North Korea on August 26. On Kim Jong-un's inspection tour following Bavi, he announced that there was minimal damage—flooded fields, damaged corn and beanstalks, washed out roads and damaged power lines, but not as bad as it might have been. (It was a category 1 hurricane equivalent when it made landfall.) But on top of the serious monsoon rains, it was certainly not welcomed. The first week of September things got worse, typhoon Maysak (No. 9) hammered the Korean Peninsula, producing additional heavy rains in the North. Wonsan on North Korea's southeast coast faced a deluge of over 5 inches of rain (132 mm) in only three hours. Kim Jong-un was there a few days later inspecting the damage, apparently including “dozens of casualties.” Again in the search for scapegoats, he fired the provincial party leader in the hardest hit area and ordered twelve thousand core party members to join the recovery effort and promised “grave punishment” of local officials. The problems may not be over yet, however, as another typhoon (Haishen—Typhoon No. 10) is headed up the Korean Peninsula with another round of heavy rains.

Then, of course there is the plague—the COVID-19 virus. North Korean officials continue to claim that the country is totally COVID-free, but little testing and government policy to cover up any cases that might have occurred may well be the explanation. The extent of official concern is reflected in the harsh effort to quarantine immediately any individuals with potential cases of the virus. The “re-defection” of a North Korean defector who illegally fled to South Korea but three years later illegally crossed the border returning to

the North led to the total quarantine of the city of Kaesong which lasted over a month. The scope and zeal of the enforced quarantine in Kaesong indicates the intensity of the North Korean effort to deal with the COVID pandemic. The poorly-funded and under-staffed medical infrastructure in the North is heavily dependent on World Health Organization programs and non-government humanitarian assistance to deal with many of its most troubling medical problems. If the COVID pandemic gets out of control, the consequences in the North could be massive and tragic.

The third challenge currently facing the North is the impact of economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council to halt Pyongyang's nuclear weapons and missile programs which are seen as a threat to international peace and security. Those sanctions have the support of China and Russia, as well as the United States and other Security Council member countries, and all UN member countries are obligated to follow them. The COVID pandemic has heightened the impact of the sanctions. Because of the concern for the spread of the pandemic, North Korea has tightened its border with China to prevent illegal border crossing and illegal importation of goods because of the fear that this will bring the dreaded virus into the North. Though, some state sanctioned smuggling is still allowed. Earlier when the border with China was more porous, sanctioned goods from China were illegally smuggled into the North and that eased the economic impact of UN sanctions. Now that the border on both sides is more tightly guarded to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the sanctions are much more effective.

In a Party Central Committee session held in mid-August, the North Korean leadership confirmed that plans to improve the national economy have been "seriously delayed" by "severe internal and external situations and unexpected manifold challenges." A party congress has been scheduled for January to deal with the consequences of the flooding, the pandemic and the economic consequences of the sanctions. Party congresses are infrequent events and they have taken place in the past only when there was some urgent need. That last Congress held in 2016 confirmed the succession of Kim Jong-un, and the Congress before that was held 26 years earlier.

Media Coverage of Typhoon Bavi Showed Major Changes

As Pyongyang has attempted to deal with these increasingly complex challenges, a particularly significant change in the format of media reporting (particularly television) took place. As Typhoon Bavi approached North Korea's west coast, the principal official Korean Central Television (KCTV) channel took the unprecedented action of broadcasting through the night. Martyn Williams with the Stimson Center notes that this was the first time KCTV broadcast around the clock for a full uninterrupted 24 hours.

The standard KCTV schedule begins in the afternoon and ends in the late evening, and follows a rigid predictable schedule. Broadcasting begins with the national anthem, followed by hymns of praise to Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. The presenter then gives the

program schedule. Any news relating to Kim Jong-un comes next followed by other news and then entertainment programming. On Thursday, August 26, as Typhoon Bavi approached the North Korean coast, even before the program schedule was given, a report from the weather service gave information about the impending landfall of the typhoon.

The other unusual change in television programming that day was on-the-scene reporting on the typhoon. North Korean TV seldom broadcasts live reports from journalists in the field. On August 26 several weather updates were broadcast from a reporter at the State Hydro-Meteorological Administration and other live reports were broadcast with journalists sheltering under umbrellas and standing in front of damaged buildings and uprooted trees. Previously the format for North Korea's main television news program has been a mature woman in a traditional hanbok (the traditional Korean dress for formal occasions) with the image of Mount Paektu in the background.

The Kim family has paid particular attention to managing the media, and there is every reason to believe that this noteworthy change in television format was done at the direction of Kim Jong-un. It is not clear whether this was a "one-off" format change, or whether this is a new inclusion of journalists reporting on the spot will be used again in similar unusual circumstances, which would bring North Korean media more in line with other international news media practice. The day immediately after the unusual programming began in connection with Typhoon Bavi, Korean television reverted to the standard format, apparently with no comment about the dramatic change in the look and feel of the news reports the previous day. Just a few days later, however, when typhoon Maysak dumped heavy rains on Wonsan, local television again aired live footage of damage.

Why the Change?

North Korean leaders are acutely aware of the technology and programming practices of news media elsewhere in the world because foreign radio and some television broadcasts do reach the North. It is illegal for North Koreans to watch any foreign news or entertainment—even the brotherly Korean-language broadcasts in China which can be heard and seen in North Korean areas near the Chinese border. North Koreans want information from beyond their border, and they access foreign broadcasts and other foreign media even though it is difficult to get and carries a significant risk of punishment if North Koreans are caught viewing or listening to foreign media.

Along the border with China, North Koreans can watch Chinese Television in the Korean language. These broadcasts are produced for the Korean-speaking population in China, so they are not specifically directed at the North, but Chinese television is better technically and programmatically than North Korean media. Furthermore, South Korean media, including popular K-pop and soap opera entertainment, is available in the North on the black market on USB drives.

With this competition from more attractive programming from abroad, the Kim government is anxious to make its domestic news and entertainment media better. It is in competition with illegal foreign media. If the official approved media is technically better and programming is more interesting, keeping viewers focused on approved North Korean media is much easier. The official media is not the only game in town, and competition is pushing North Korean television to be better.

A second reason the media may be shifting its programming is to highlight the external forces that are making life more difficult in North Korea. With flooding, the COVID pandemic, and economic sanctions it is much more difficult for Kim Jong-un to create the “heaven on earth” that North Korea’s ideology promises.

That is particularly difficult because the Kim family leaders are played up in laudatory propaganda as superhuman miracle workers, and Kim Jong-un is certainly part of that mythology. In December 2017, for example, national video broadcasts show Kim high on Mount Paektu, North Korea’s sacred mountain which plays an important role in the mythology of the Korean people. In the video, the 9,000 foot mountain was swathed in snow, wind and cold. In the words of the official film of the event, it suddenly became a “marvelous scene with glee at the reappearance of its great master.” The mountain showed “fine weather unprecedented” in December. The KCNA report on Kim’s climb up the mountain said, “His eyes reflected the strong beams of the gifted great person seeing in the majestic spirit of Mount Paektu the appearance of a powerful socialist nation which dynamically advances full of vigor without vacillation at any raving dirty wind on the planet.”

The problem of boasting about supernatural powers is that when things get tough, people may expect the Supreme Leader magically to solve the country’s problems. It may well be that with flooding, the COVID pandemic, and sanctions to deal with, the leader is using greater honesty in the media to downplay his supernatural powers. By showing on-the-spot news reports of the impact of the flooding and typhoons, it gives the North Korean people a better sense of the reality and significance of the problems the country is facing. This may ease expectations for the chief miracle worker.

Further indications that the Leader is concerned about the seriousness of the problems is the fact that the head of the government, Prime Minister, Kim Jae-ryong, was fired at the Politburo meeting on August 13. The Prime Minister is focused primarily on management of the economy, and his replacement was an obvious indication of dissatisfaction about the economic problems facing the country. The prime minister was a convenient scapegoat. Another villain to blame was found in Wonsan after Typhoon Maysak dropped heavy rain on the southeast—the local party leader was fired.

Kim Jong-un announced at the August 13th Politburo meeting that North Korea would not accept flood or COVID pandemic assistance. Fears that foreign aid workers might bring COVID virus infection was behind the rejection. Another reason for this strong statement of North Korea's self-reliance, however, might be that for the sake of appearances it is better preemptively to reject assistance when such help may not be given if it were requested. South Korea is one of the few possible donors for the North. The Moon Jae-in government appears to be interested in aid as a way to improve the strained North-South relationship. On the other hand, the South has been treated poorly by Pyongyang for the last several months, including the overly dramatic blowing-up of the North-South liaison office in Kaesong just a few weeks ago. There is little chance the United States would offer aid, the World Health Organization is inundated with requests for COVID help from many of the poorest countries in the world, and the pandemic-induced economic downturn throughout the world makes this a very difficult time to be seeking help.

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